This week's community profile: Oconto

Holiday project: Judy Daul and Ray Ackerman Jr. are two of the Oconto citizens who decorate evergreens at Holtwood Park with Christmas lights and ornaments for the annual Winter Wonderland.

'A sense of belonging' here

By Patty Hoeft
Press-Gazette

OCONTO — In Oconto, it often seems as though everybody knows everybody else's business.

But that's not so bad, say some local folks.

"I look at it the other way — isn't it nice that so many people care," said Pam Parise, 37, 613 Main St.

Press-Gazette photos by Ken Behrend

Pam and her husband Larry, 45, moved to the small city 14 years ago where they could afford to buy a "big beautiful house" and raise three children.

Oconto is about 30 miles north of Green Bay on U.S. 41.

Larry commutes to Little Suamico where he works as a fifth-grade teacher at Little Suamico School. Pam babysits at home and cares for foster children.

The Parise children — Josh, 14, Seth, 10, and Tessa, 7, and foster daughter Jennie, 13 — walk to school along city sidewalks lined with homes of friends and neighbors.

"It makes me feel secure and it gives my kids a sense of belonging," said Pam. "Our church, our friends and neighbors have become our extended family. I know if I ever needed anything, I wouldn't hestitate to call them."

Bumping into familiar faces is common in small communities.

"I kinda like that," said Naomi Pecor, 60, of 339½ Jefferson St. "I like the fact that you can walk into a grocery store and look at someone and know who they are."

Pecor is retired and lives with her husband Charles, 73. Three years ago she was diagnosed with cancer and ever since her health has been the business of an annonymous well-wisher who "every once in a while" sends a get-well card and a $100 bill.

"It's been going on for three years. I kinda wish I knew who the person was so I could thank them," Pecor said.

Keeping anything secret is a challenge in a community that has only two grocery stores, three banks, three dentists, three doctors, a library and a 30-bed hospital.

"Here, it kind of blows my mind because I can call a lot of patients by their first names," said Pat Lade, 47, an operating room technician for 23 years at Oconto Memorial Hospital.

Steady traffic on U.S. 41 cuts through the city's west side, but Wayne's Family Restaurant lures motorists with homemade soups, pies and Oconto charm.

"We've got friendly waitresses and good food," said Wayne Bostwick, 51, who owns the restaurant with his wife, Karen.

"We get a lot of repeats," said waitress Anne Russell, with coffee pot in hand. "I made a lot of friends from different states who were just passing through."

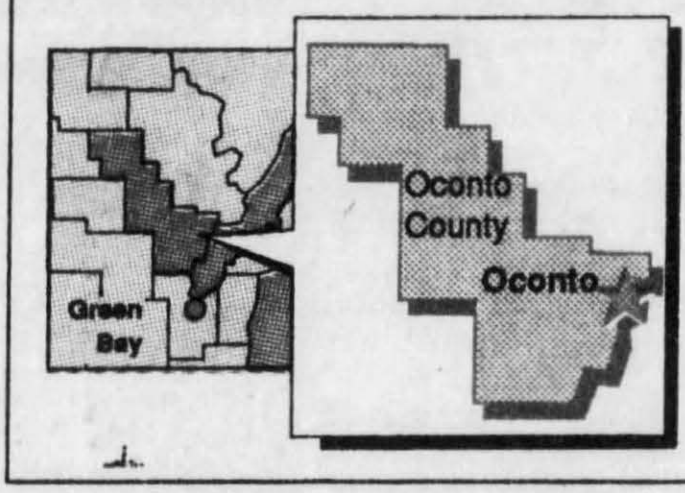
Main Street leads through a struggling downtown area, but mainstays refuse to give up hopes for a brighter future.

"We got only one place to go and that's up," said Mayor William Bake.

A new $1.6 million City Hall anchors the east end of Main Street. Other revitalization efforts include construction of a Courthouse annex, office building at the Oconto Municipal Airport and a Veterans Memorial fountain in front of the courthouse.

Green Bay's shoreline and a 520-foot bulkhead at Oconto Breakwater Park lie about a mile past City Hall. Avid boaters and fishing enthusiaists flock to the waters year round.

"I'm a minute away from boating, fishing, water skiing and you can just about hunt right in your backyard," said Mark Thompson, 41, owner of Thompson Foods.



The Oconto file

- **Population:** 4,474
- **Origin of name:** A Menominee Indian word that means pike place.
- **Claim to fame:** Officials say it's the Perch Capital of the World.
- **Festive:** Copper Culture Festival held third weekend in June. Parade, ice cream social at Old Beyer Home.
- **Involved:** Residents decorate evergreens at Holtwood Park with Christmas lights and ornaments.

■ **Next week:** Navarino in Shawano County

Coffee and conversation: Waitress Anne Russell of Oconto waits on Ron Schuh, left, of Lena, and Gary Blohm of Seymour, at Wayne's Family Restaurant on U.S. 41.

Off to school: Pam Parise and her four children say a morning prayer before they leave for school. From left, are Seth, 10; Tessa, 7; Pam; Josh, 14, and foster daughter Jennie Drexler, 13.